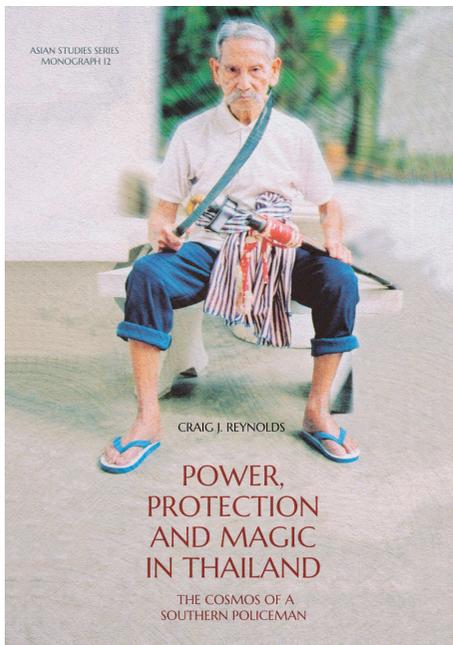


## Reviews

*Power, Protection, and Magic in Thailand: The Cosmos of a Southern Policeman* by Craig J. Reynolds. Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2019. ISBN: 9781760463168. A\$50.



Craig J. Reynolds is an unusual historian of Thailand. Unlike many scholars who continue to mine the crowded field of prominent historical figures or events in Thai history, Craig has never failed to surprise us by exploring unfamiliar terrain and writing about offbeat subjects that magically lead us to a better understanding of Thai culture and history. It is his insatiable curiosity and knack for seeking out unconventional ways to explore Thai history that has kept his fans eager to read or to engage him in serious discussion about his latest project.

Over the course of his long and illustrious career, Craig has tried to understand and to explain Thailand by researching and writing about Buddhism, Thai feudalism and Marxist ideas, Thai handbooks and manuals, gender in Thai history, and seditious histories. About

the time when he was thinking of retiring from full-time teaching he mentioned to his friends and students that he wanted to “change the direction of my research” one more time, to explore a different type of research, preferably another offbeat subject overlooked by other scholars. His supportive and indulgent spouse Sue suggested that Craig write a novel, which he had perhaps considered but the historian in him would not give up easily. The ensuing result is this unusual and mesmerizing book about an amulet, a provincial policeman, *saiyasat* (black magic beliefs and practices), and the consolidation of the Thai nation state in Southern Thailand.

In a visit to Thailand in around 2007, Craig noticed that a particular amulet known as *Jatukhamramathep* had become popular and commanded high prices in the amulet market. This amulet is hard to ignore because of its unusually large size (about 3

inches in diameter) and those who wore it around their necks had to display it openly. Traditionally, Thais wore a necklace adorned with many Buddhist and animistic amulets inside their shirts or blouses for protection, or good luck. But because of the size of the *Jatukhamramatheap*, it had to be worn singly and openly.

Villa Vilaithong, one of his students, was aware of Craig's interest in the *Jatukhamramatheap* and his search for a new project to keep him busy during his early retirement. She was also aware, in particular, of his interest in Buddhism in southern Thailand where he had spent time as a Peace Corps volunteer, and his penchant for offbeat subjects. She suggested that Craig read Ran Niranam's *Jom wittaya yut phutthakkhom Khao Or saolin haeng muang Phatthalung (The Khao-or Masters of the Science of Struggle and Buddhist Incantation: The Shaolin of Phatthalung)* (2007). The central figure in that book was Butr Phantharak, a provincial police chief in southern Thailand who had spent time at a cave monastery to study *saiyasat* to toughen himself physically, mentally, and spiritually.

By the time that Craig visited Nakhon Si Thammarat, Butr Phantharak (1898-2006) had died two years earlier. Butr had been ennobled by King Rama VII with the title Khun Phantharak – “he who pledged to protect royal power.” However, Craig was able to interview his sons and to read the many written accounts of Khun Phan's exploits. His research was facilitated by his former student Patrick Jory who was at that time teaching at Walailak University.

Born in Nakhon Si Thammarat, Khun Phantharak was educated in Bangkok and graduated from the Police Academy in the late 1920s. His education in Bangkok exposed him to the emerging concept of the Thai nation state which he brought back to his hometown in Southern Thailand. His final official post was police chief of Nakhon Si Thammarat holding the rank of Police Major General.

Khun Phantharak's connection to the *Jatukhamramatheap* is also cloaked in folklore, coincidence, and magic. The amulet is neither Buddhist nor Hindu. It was a creation in 1986 to raise funds to build a new city pillar in Nakhon Si Thammarat. The iconography of the amulet is an amalgam of the Buddha and two mystical figures from the Srivijaya era (8th to 12th century CE). When the amulet was consecrated, a seance medium was consulted. During one of his trances, the medium asked “why so many bandits were allowed to run rampant in the area, and shouldn't someone do something about them? And why are you here now when I have been waiting for you for 1000 years?” When asked about the amulet and its powers, the medium said that the “man with the mustache” should be consulted. The person with the prominent mustache was no other than Khun Phantharak, the retired police chief and well-known crime fighter. It was said that when the sponsors of the amulet went to meet Khun Phan, he was already waiting for them to explain the prowess of the deities represented in the amulet. Khun Phan suggested that the deities were the sons of King Chandrabhanu of the ancient Srivijaya kingdom that ruled the Southern Malay Peninsula and the island of Sumatra. Later interpretations were similar. However the amulet did not gain widespread popularity judging by its market value until two decades later. When first issued, it was sold for about ten Baht. By the mid-2000s the value of the first edition of the amulet had skyrocketed to over 100,000 baht. The popularity of the *Jatukhamramatheap* reached its peak in 2005

during the political struggle between the Red and Yellow Shirt groups. For protection, the Yellow Shirt leaders issued a special edition of the amulet known as the “Save the Nation” edition and rumor has it that the deities instructed the Yellow Shirt leaders about what to do. It was also believed that the deities protected the demonstration stage of the Yellow Shirts as a sacred and invulnerable space. Some people also believed that the amulet protected Sonthi Limthongkul, the Yellow Shirt leader, from assassins’ bullets when his car was attacked.

Craig’s initial interest in the amulet eventually led to his discovery of the magical Khao Or cave monastery and its teaching of *saiyasat* magic which in turn led him to one of its most prominent disciples, Khun Phan. Studying *saiyasat* and magical amulets is interesting, but to write a biography of this remarkable provincial policeman would open up the scope of Craig’s project. After laying out ideas about his research in an article, “Rural male leadership, religion, and the environment in Thailand’s mid-south, 1920s-1960s” (*Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 42, 1 (2011): 39-57), it took Craig another eight years of research and writing to produce this book.

The origins of Khun Phan are also cloaked in mystery and contradictions. His age is subject to interpretation because various sources list his birth as 1898, or 1900, or 1903. The first date is significant because if he died in 2006, it would put his age at 108, a number associated with prosperity in Buddhist and Brahmanical astrology. 108 is also the number of marks represented on the Buddha’s feet. However the picture taken in 2000 used on the cover of this book is supposed to be of Khun Phan when he turned 100 years old: this suggests that he was born in 1900 and not 1898. The picture is somewhat anachronistic and modern at the same time. Khun Phan is seated. His face shows determination and intimidation, tight-lipped, eyes staring ahead, and buffalo-horn mustache prominent. He is wearing jeans with the trouser legs rolled up to expose his feet wearing rubber flip-flops. The image is unusual because it does not show Khun Phan in full police uniform, but as a typical *nakleng* or tough guy in jeans and the common man’s flip-flops. This is the modern part of the image. But what people will also notice are the anachronistic talismans of his power—a Malay kris and a Thai sword wrapped in a red sash. The kris belonged to a notorious Muslim bandit known for having magical powers contained in his kris that made him impervious to Khun Phan’s bullets. But Khun Phan was able to use his own magical powers to capture the bandit and to confiscate the talismanic kris. For that feat, Khun Phan earned the Malay epithet *rajo kaci* or the “Little Raja.”

After a raid to close down a gambling den carried out successfully by Khun Phan and his men, the ruthless treatment of victims of the raid led to the temporary reassignment in 1943 of Khun Phan to Phichit in the north which is also famous for having monks inculcated in the black arts. Here Khun Phan acquired his talismanic sword, reputed to have belonged to Phraya Phichai who fought side by side with King Taksin to drive the Burmese out of Siam. In ancient times, a sword would be given by the king for good deeds performed in the name of the state. It is significant that Khun Phan chose to have his picture taken with his sword instead of more modern weapon. Apparently, he chose to display the sword as a symbol of his power related both to *saiyasat* and the monarchy (symbol of the Thai nation state).

Accounts of Khun Phan's pacification of the southern provinces and his campaigns against notorious bandits vary from source to source. But it is clear that the widespread arrest and execution of bandits uniformly reflect the harsh methods used by the police under his command. He is even known to have had a bandit's head displayed publicly, emulating a former royal practice. During his service in the north of Thailand and later in his hometown in the south, Khun Phan was able to pacify the countryside by eliminating banditry, gambling, and lawlessness. In one particular campaign, he ordered his men to leave the dead to rot in the sun for several days. Feared and respected in the lawless south, Khun Phan was hailed as a model loyal servant of the king/state, a man of high morals.

Due to the lack of other credible state authority, Khun Phan acted in the name of the sovereign and state. Unlike police forces in colonial Southeast Asia where law enforcement had to be ethical or appear ethical to those under police protection, the Thai police, especially during the time that Khun Phan was active, relied on force and suppression alone, as the Thai state expanded its control to its peripheral territory. The use of force by the police is condoned and even celebrated by its leadership, then and now.

To eliminate opium trafficking in his province, Khun Phan intercepted a large opium shipment. He was unaware that it belonged to Police General Phao Sriyanon, then Director General of the National Police Department. Phao is known as "Father of the Modern Thai Police", but he made money through the narcotics trade, condoned police brutality, and built up the police force to rival the other branches of the Thai armed forces. Khun Phan was summoned to Bangkok to meet General Phao, but instead of being reprimanded or fired for raiding the opium shipment, Phao presented a coveted diamond ring to Khun Phan thereby inducting him into Phao's elite group of assassins known as *asawin* or knights. Phao recognized that Khun Phan epitomized the kind of police officer he liked and needed. Phao's *asawin* would intimidate and instill fear in his political rivals. Thus Khun Phan's ruthlessness against his public enemies was not just condoned but celebrated by the police.

Khun Phan started his training in the martial arts as a young boy to prepare himself for a career as a policeman. By the time he entered the Police Academy, he was already proficient in Thai boxing, sword fighting, and judo. Because he was small in stature, he also enhanced his personal power with *saiyasat* learnt at the Khao Or cave monastery. His education at the monastery also taught him how to be a man—pure of heart, faithful, never wronging another man's wife, fearless, refusing bribes, honoring parents and true to his word. Khun Phan's reliance on *saiyasat* gave him self-confidence and a sense of invincibility. *Saiyasat* is a belief system in opposition to "reason". It is buttressed by a repertoire of physical self-strengthening such as purifying baths, confirming astrological advantages, and chanting sacred mantras before engaging in dangerous campaigns. Khun Phan's confidence in *saiyasat* actually emboldened him to be more ruthless in his actions. The confidence in his special knowledge was cultivated and deployed as an armor against harm. He even had the executioner's initials tattooed on his knuckles to warn his enemies that his hands were capable of instant death if he struck them or fired a bullet at them.

In every chapter covering the deeds of Khun Phan, Craig Reynolds, the historian, subtly inserts relevant historical background information, lengthy discussions and

analyses. I have already mentioned how, in his analysis, policing at the margins of the state was a way to help spread and consolidate the young Thai nation state. In Chapter Three, he provides a detailed description of the mid and deep south and explains their historical development within the Thai nation state, demonstrating how the police force was in fact the sole agent of the sovereign state exercising legitimate force and coercion to show citizens in those areas that they were living under the rule of law and order established by the state.

Chapter Five covers magical thinking and how it helps to dispel fear and uncertainty, discussing how *saiyasat* is used by Khun Phan, while elaborating the role of amulets and *saiyasat* in Thai culture. This chapter also contains a lengthy discussion of the market value of amulets, and their usage by the general public, the police, and the military. The latter two groups still rely on the magical powers of amulets, either worn or inserted under the skin for protection. There is also an explanation how “objects with auspicious matter” or *watthu mongkhon* are made through blessings by monks and kings to transform inanimate objects into powerful talismans with special powers and magical energy. The author also explains that the market for amulets and *watthu mongkhon* has become a huge industry that even has its own magazines, and that these objects are bought, traded, and hoarded as investments. Moreover, international collectors of Thai amulets can buy them from several internet vendors or even more conveniently on ebay.

In conclusion, even though Khun Phan is too minor a character to appear in Thai national history, his life and actions transcend the local and the regional to reflect how law and order were established at the territorial margins of the state in the first half of the 20th century. In the author’s capable hands, this minor historical figure helps us to understand major processes of state formation and common belief systems. The belief in magical knowledge and invincibility is not just a strategy for the weak to protect themselves from the state authorities, but *saiyasat* is also used by agents of the state. This biographical study of Khun Phan is thus an engaging, mesmerizing, and captivating read. We learn about policing, magical knowledge, banditry, the ruthless use of force, amulets, and conditions in southern Thailand. And more importantly, we learn about Thai history, culture, and society along the way.

Finally, it is important to note that this book has also been published as an “open access” text by Australian National University Press (ANU Press) so that readers can download the whole text or specific chapters without charge from the ANU Press website. We always talk about how an author’s distinctive “voice” can be recognized throughout his or her text. Many times, we even imagine recognizing the “voice” while reading a text without knowing the identity of the writer. In the case of *Power, Protection, and Magic in Thailand*, however, the reader can actually hear the author’s “voice.” By downloading the *html* file of the book, the reader will be greeted with a short video introduction by the author at the beginning of each chapter. Most historians are wonderful raconteurs but Craig Reynolds is exceptional. His sonorous voice, well-conceived and captivating narrations continue to resonate in my mind as I read the accompanying text. I only wish that this text had also been published as an audio book.

Thak Chaloemtiarana